

Service & “Sacred Conversations” Fill The Green

by ALLAN APPEL | Aug 7, 2023 1:57 pm

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Jerusalem Peace Builders students Malak Swidan, Tavor Hazani, Hafeed Khalaily

If you pack survival kits for the homeless, or hammer in some boards on an affordable house in-the-making, or set upright fallen tombstones in an old Jewish cemetery that needs some love, you'll be powerfully transformed — and that act of peace-making might just change the world.

In theory and practice that potentially transformative idea was on display on the New Haven Green Sunday afternoon where 200 people gathered for [our town's third annual](#) Interfaith Service Day.

It featured 20 Israeli Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Druze teens, from the Jerusalem Peacebuilders, getting to know each other for the first time and sharing the results with local Nutmeggers. They talked about the beauty and difficulty of it — all under a bright optimistic sun among two dozen blue and white tents on the College-and-Elm Street corner of the Green.



Bruce Barrett (right) with volunteer Bryan Thompson from Milford's Mary Taylor United Methodist Church

Organized by Bruce Barrett and his [IWagePeace](#) organization, with the special participation of the [Jerusalem Peacebuilders \(JPB\)](#), no fewer than 13 churches – count 'em! – five synagogues, and three mosques and their members were participating in concrete action opportunities for caring provided by half a dozen local nonprofits, from [Swords to Ploughshares CT](#) to the Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen (DESK) and Columbus House to the Hebrew Free Burial and Free Loan Association.

Gathering so many diverse groups together for better communication and a common good was an act of peace and organizing skill in its own right.

“Theological agreement is not necessary,” Barrett said, “to work on justice and peace and to feed people.”

In the early 2000s and inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others and infuriated by American jingoism, Barrett began a website to promote peace-building through putting up “I Wage Peace” billboards (the family business is Barrett Outdoor Communications).



The Bag Line packing 825 "blessing bags."

He soon began working with interfaith groups – peace walks over the years in the West Bank, then back home in New Haven and West Haven, [organizing clean-ups among other service work](#) with the different faith communities and with a growing focus on trying to bring young Israelis and Palestinians together.

Enter the Jerusalem Peacebuilders, who organize in-school leadership and peace-building workshops in Jerusalem-area schools, then expanded in recent years into an international summer camp, with annual visits to the New Haven area, and the Interfaith Day of Service was born.

“These [16 to 18-year-old] young people embody interfaith understanding and tolerance and want to help catalyze it here,” said JPB Founder and President Rev. Canon Nicholas Porter. “And we need it more than ever in New Haven, Connecticut, America. The same dynamics of division that plague the Middle East plague us here. And these young people through their practice have the authority to recognize that and help us work it through.”

Case in point is Hafeed Khalaila who hails from [Sakhnin](#), a small Muslim town in the Lower Galilee in Northern Israel, and who is on his third summer trip with JPB. “My school basically teaches the history of Islam,” he said to a group of listeners, many from area churches. “We don’t learn about other religions. I knew the concept of the [Jewish] Sabbath, but had never seen the practice [until visits with local Jews on the trip]. I also never understood [before] what Christians did with the wine and bread.”



Pam Ely and Bob Giolitto, of St. Matthews Church, Wilton, with Tavor Hazani in conversation

Sitting nearby him, Malak Swidan, a Christian from Nazareth, added: “In my Christian school we don’t study other religions [either]. In my town I hear them [that is, the Muslim call to prayer], but here I learned on Friday how it’s done when we went to Muslim prayer. Also new for me is how Jews end the Sabbath [with candle lighting].”

Likewise Jenny Weijl, who lives in [Mazkeret Batya](#), about 25 miles from Tel Aviv said she has grown up in a liberal Jewish household but has no opportunity to meet Muslims or Christians at home on a daily basis.

“I feel our generation is more open-minded and when someone from our generation becomes prime minister, it’ll be different. I know I’m in a privileged position, but then it will be better for my [non-Jewish] friends.”

This reporter asked the JPB young people if in effect they had given up on older people, that is, the current older generation of leaders to make peace in Israel — or in other conflicts the world over.

“No,” said Jennifer. “My grandmother was anti-LGBT but when my sister came out, she changed. There’s room for change in every generation.”

Another Christian student from Nazareth, Mira Elias, replied on the issue of hope: “You are a majority here, but we Christians are a minority in Israel and it’s not easy.”

When Pam Ely, from St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Wilton, asked what she does with a friend who doesn't want to hear about the other side, Mira replied, "I was like that [myself]. I didn't want to change by making friends who are Jews. But then I asked myself, Wait, what's this mindset? Maybe it's from my grandparents [that I got it], but this *can* change."



Katie Hill of Stop Solitary CT

This was all excellent news for Bob Giolitto, retired from a career in marketing who now runs a tutoring program for refugee kids in Norwalk. "I need hope for my grandchildren. I admire you so much. You are the hope."

Then he cited the kids in Florida who, after [the 2018 Parkland mass shooting](#), took the lead with their grassroots organizing and demonstrating, which led to changes in that state's gun laws. "What gets publicized," he said, "is mainly the conflict. Please keep this going. This confirms my hope."

But hope was flowing both ways on Sunday.

Hafeed looked around the Green where he saw Swords into Ploughshares volunteer blacksmiths shuttling between portable forge and anvil turning a gun barrel into a mattock. Nearby, in another tent, you could hear criminal justice reform advocate Barbara Fair describing in graphic detail the assaultive indignity of the Connecticut prison strip search, and Hafeed concluded: "The main source of hope for me *is* these guys [that is, his JPB colleagues], but also all these other programs here."

Billed in the day's activity guide as "sacred conversations," these remarks strike this reporter as that not because they are filled with poetry or the lingo of spirituality. But rather precisely because they are so candid, yet also so quotidian and yet so rare, and the basic building block of peace-making.

Or as Barrett put it more succinctly, "How do you learn to listen to people you're taught to hate? We'll sit in a circle, have a conversation."

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